

# Oral Health for the Senior Population

“Everyone needs dental care every day...”



## Oral Health in Massachusetts: A Fact Sheet

### Why Is Dental Health So Important?

There are significant links to dental health and *overall* health. According to Former Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop, “You are not healthy without good oral health.” A healthy mouth is important for many aspects of life, including eating well, absence of dental pain, personal relationships and feeling good about your appearance. Older adults need to be especially concerned about their oral health due to its relationship with systemic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes, and the effect of some medications on the oral cavity. Dental diseases like tooth decay, and oral diseases like gingivitis and periodontitis, cause pain difficulty in chewing, gums to bleed while brushing and bad breath, as well as teeth to loosen. Oral hygiene, medication use, and nutrition, in addition to access to regular dental care, play a role in how healthy your teeth and mouth will be.

#### Massachusetts Oral Health Facts

- ✓ 68% of seniors have some natural teeth
- ✓ 34% of seniors living in the community have untreated decay, compared with 59% living in long term care facilities
- ✓ 20% of seniors living in the community hadn’t visited a dentist in the last five years
- ✓ 58% of older adults with diabetes were missing 6 or more teeth compared to 42% without diabetes

### Good Oral Health

#### 1. Brush and floss every day...use fluoride toothpaste.

- Use a manual or power toothbrush. Always remember to change your toothbrush every 3 to 4 months or after a cold.
- Use fluoride toothpaste and drink fluoridated water to keep the teeth and roots strong.
- If flossing is difficult, try using floss-aides such as floss picks, floss threaders, or a proxabrush.

#### 2. Drink fluoridated water...water fluoridation benefits everyone, regardless of age.

- 140 communities in Massachusetts offer their residents the health and economic benefits of water fluoridation. To find out if your community has fluoridated water call your local water department or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health at 617-624-5943.

#### 3. Visit the dentist office regularly...it’s important even if you don’t have any natural teeth.

- An annual dental examination is important, even if you have dentures or no teeth at all.
- Know your medical history! It’s important that a thorough medical history is always taken when visiting a dental office. It’s helpful to bring a list of your medications and their dosages to each appointment.
- Early detection is key! Be sure the dentist or dental hygienist performs an oral cancer screening at least yearly.

## Oral Effects of Medication Use

What is the link between medications and oral health? More than 500 medications (prescription drugs, over the counter drugs, vitamins and minerals) can affect the teeth and mouth. The most common side effect of medication use is a dry mouth.

- **Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)**
  - A reduction in the amount and flow of saliva increases the risk for cavities (tooth decay). Saliva contains anti-microbial components and minerals that may rebuild the tooth. Drinking fluoridated water or sugar-free drinks throughout the day will help keep the mouth somewhat wet. Also, if the medication allows, taking it during meal time may help.
  - The following are steps to help alleviate dry mouth:
    - Drink fluoridated water
    - Choose **sugar-free** candies and gum
    - Use fluoride toothpaste
    - Consider using a saliva substitute

## Denture Care

If you have dentures, it's important to remove them each night and to visit a dental professional at least yearly for an examination of your gums, cheeks and tongue.

Like natural teeth, dentures must be brushed daily to remove food deposits and plaque. Brushing helps prevent dentures from becoming permanently stained and helps your mouth stay healthy. It's best to use a brush designed for cleaning dentures. A toothbrush with soft bristles can also be used. Avoid using hard-bristled brushes since they may damage dentures.

Some denture wearers, who don't use toothpaste, may use hand soap or mild dishwashing liquid, which are both acceptable for cleaning dentures. Avoid using other powdered household cleansers, which may be too abrasive. Also, avoid using bleach, as this may permanently whiten the pink portion of the denture.

Steps to cleaning a denture:

- Step One: Rinse away loose food particles thoroughly.
- Step Two: Moisten the brush and apply a denture cleanser.
- Step Three: Brush every surface, scrubbing gently to avoid damage and rinse thoroughly.

*For more information, contact:*

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